

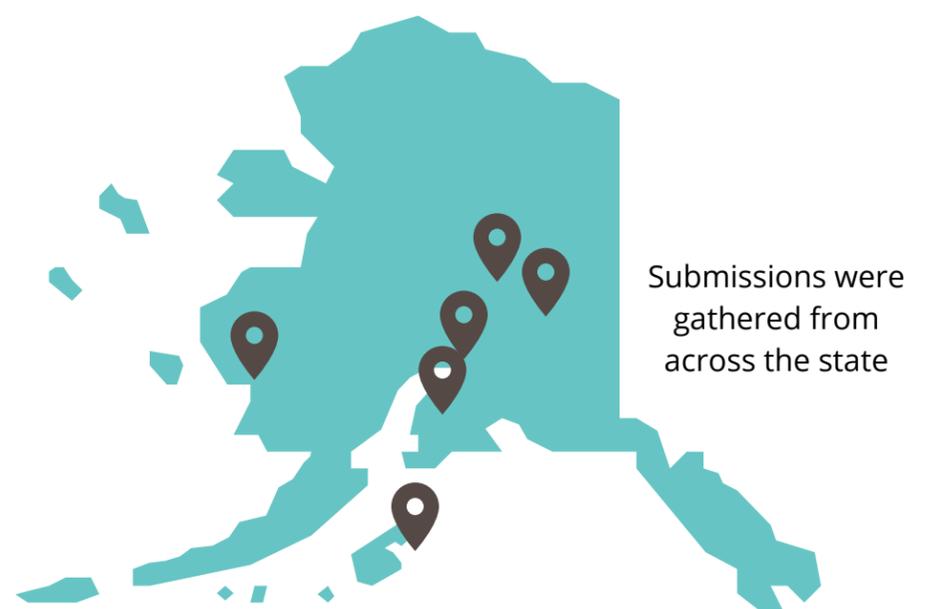
I Am Going Outside

How does race and culture shape our relationship to the land? Alaskans share their perspectives.

For many, the outdoors poses a threat. Not because of the natural elements, not because of the threat of bears or moose, but because of the long history of environmental racism in the United States. The Center for American Progress's report *The Nature Gap* calls this "nature deprivation," stating "The inequitable distribution of nature's benefits in the United States is not the result of a consenting choice of communities of color or low-income communities to live near less nature, to allow more nature destruction nearby, or to give up their right to clean air and clean water." Rather, Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) have been targets on the land and of inequitable land-use.

Thus, race and the land are intimately tied. Despite this, or at times because of it, many BIPOC people have specific relationships to the land, finding it to be a place of solace, survival, and sustenance. In Alaska, this is especially true with 231 federally recognized tribes occupying Alaska Native lands from time immemorial, living off the land. How then, do Alaskans make sense of this tension?

When the Forum began this conversation about race and the outdoors we fumbled over vocabulary. From the very start the English language creates a divide between the inside and the outside. For this reason, we asked our interviewees to define the vocabulary that they are most connected to. In our experience, the conversations that are the most difficult are often the most important to have. That's why we're offering a Kindling Conversation toolkit and funding to host community conversations about race, culture, and the outdoors. The toolkit uses the perspectives shared on the following pages as a springboard for conversation around the questions, How do our race and culture shape our relationship to the land? How does that shape the decisions we make about it? Then, it's your turn to share your point of view.



Brianna Gray



Which of these words do you feel most connected to: wilderness, the land, the outdoors, nature, the environment, or something else?
The Land.

What do you see as your responsibilities to it?

I was raised to take care of the land, take care of the sea/ocean, and that subsistence is sustenance for life. Therefore, I am very intentional in ensuring that I am not only practicing respect for the land and sea but encouraging and educating others around me. And I will continue to use my voice to advocate in protecting our sacred lands.

What words do you prefer to use when describing your race?

I consider myself a black Unangan woman.

How has your race or culture shaped your relationship to it?

I grew up in a village called King Cove on the Aleutian Islands. We lived off of the land and worked hard to protect our land. One of our values as Unangan people is to live with and respect the land, sea, and all of nature. When I am out on the land and sea I feel more connected to who I am as a person. And I continue to share these values with my children, community, and family.

Cisco Mercado



Which of these words do you feel most connected to: wilderness, the land, the outdoors, nature, the environment, or something else?
The word I prefer to use is outside.

How has your race or culture shaped your relationship to it?

As a child growing up in the crack era of New York City, I would always tell my Grandmother, "I am going outside." Going outside meant a number of things to us, like going to the corner store, to the park, or just hanging out with your friends on the block. We never thought about our race, when we were outside, because we were all the same, no matter what color we were, we were all poor. Going outside was all about our culture, because we brought something of ourselves to the outside. From men and women playing dominoes on the block or us playing handball in the local playground, while we were listening to loud music on the radio. There were no woods or mountains, it was just a concrete jungle as our form of nature, sprinkled with some trees.

What do you see as your responsibilities to it?

My responsibility to the outside is to pass it on to the next generation and protect it from police brutality. With gentrification occurring in most major cities, we are losing the culture of the outside. We have outsiders coming into the community and redefining what the outside should be and look like. We are losing a major part of our culture. I want my nieces and nephews to experience the culture of the outside. While we were outside, we were always bothered by the police. Most of the time, we were just kids trying to have a fun time outside. We had guns pulled on us. We were spit on and cursed at by the people wearing blue. We lived in a state of fear, we just accepted it as the way it was. I never want the next generation to feel the pain and sadness we experienced on a daily basis.

ALASKA
HUMANITIES
FORUM

What words do you prefer to use when describing your race?

I am a Latino (Hispanic) and Black male.

Sarah Mehl Histand



Sarah Mehl Histand hikes up the Ambler River, on Kuvuan KaNianiq, Dënëndeh, & Inupiat Land. Photo by Luc Mehl.

Which of these words do you feel most connected to: wilderness, the land, the outdoors, nature, the environment, or something else?

Nature.

How has your race or culture shaped your relationship to it?

I am a white Alaskan and I come from a Mennonite family. Hiking, fishing, ice skating, and canoeing were central to my youth on the Kenai Peninsula. Growing up I felt very connected to the land, and though I've often had imposter syndrome related to being a woman outside, my race was rarely on my mind. Growing up race felt like a non-issue; nearly everyone I saw on my outdoor adventures was like me: white or white-passing. As an adult, I began to recognize what a privilege it had been to not have to think about my race, and I've been reflecting on those implications ever since. Finally, I call on my family's Mennonite value of simplicity whenever I'm packing for a backcountry trip, and our value of service in my relationship to the land and to the outdoor recreation community.

What do you see as your responsibilities to it?

Having grown up and lived nearly all my life in Alaska, I feel keenly aware of how incredible it is to live close to nature's wild places and how easily we could lose our wild land to development and climate change. I feel a responsibility to support Indigenous leaders in the protection of the land from these threats. I also feel a responsibility to help others connect with nature in their own way, as being outside can be empowering, healing, and fun. I'd like to see outdoor recreation in all its forms be accessible and welcoming for all and I'd like to see wild places protected from development so that we humans can live in healthy relationship to nature.

ALASKA

HUMANITIES

FORUM

What words do you prefer to use when describing your race?

White.

Fong Sai Wing



Which of these words do you feel most connected to: wilderness, the land, the outdoors, nature, the environment, or something else?
The sea.

How has your race or culture shaped your relationship to it?

Hong Kong, the city I was born and grew up in, was a developing world manufacturing hub on the southeast China coast. It was ruled as a colony, part of the British Empire, bordered by communist China to the north. I grew up in the remnants of a dynastic feudal patriarchal environment. Our daily lives were ruled by tradition, subservience, and silence. Questioning and self-expression were discouraged, yet expectations to achieve material wealth and recognition were intolerably high. The sea is my escape, my companion, my life – a place where I find peace, strength, and solace. It has provided a means of living in this material world since my teens, and continues to this day.

What do you see as your responsibilities to it?

All aspects of my life depend on the sea. Without it, I would not be the person I am today. The sea flows through my veins. It is a source of sustenance and nourishment for not only for my body and soul but the rest of humanity, whether they are cognizant of it or not. As a beneficiary of the sea, and with my role as an information provider to those who rely on it to make a living in a capitalistic society, it is imperative that I also stress the importance to my audience to respect, preserve, and sustain the resource that they take from.

What words do you prefer to use when describing your race?

Endure, hardship, resilient, strength, survival.

Samarys Seguinot Medina (Sama/Umyuugalek)



I took this picture earlier this year. Is one of my favorite places of Borikén. This is Jobos beach in Isabela, Borikén (Puerto Rico).

Which of these words do you feel most connected to: wilderness, the land, the outdoors, nature, the environment, or something else?

The Land.

How has your race or culture shaped your relationship to it?

I am a Boricua from the Archipelago of Borikén islands of Puerto Rico). I was born and raised between the greenery of the countryside and the turquoise Caribbean Sea. When my feet and hands

touch the earth or are submerged in the ocean, I feel an immediate connection to something profound, a feeling of joy and belonging, a sense of peace that I cannot find in anything else. To me my land is my first mother (Madre Patria), the one that gave birth to my ancestors and their stories, the one that gave me the first taste of plátanos, the one that showed me the sounds of our ancestral music, bomba, the Caribbean breeze and waters that gave me the typical sing song of the Boricua spoken language and the poetry of Julia de Burgos. Boricuas are a direct representation of our land and waters, colorful, happy, giving, diverse and with an abundance that comes from the heart.

What do you see as your responsibilities to it?

As a daughter of the land, Caribbean Sea and sun I have taken the responsibilities to care for her as an environmental activist and environmental health scientist. Always sharing with others, the importance of being good stewards of the land and waters that have provided everything we need to live and thrive. One of the main responsibilities that I recognize is to continue connecting the Boricua youth to their lands and the sea. To provide a space to connect with the natural world through the senses, feelings, sciences, to help inspire understanding of how precious, interconnected, and unique these treasures are. To spark the imagination on how we can better the care and protections they need for the happiness and well-being of all the present and future children of the Caribbean Sea. To help them understand that Borikén is our motherland we have in common, that we are brothers and sisters, that we belong to her and she belongs to us and that without her we wouldn't be who we are.

What words do you prefer to use when describing your race?

Boricua, Puerto Rican, Caribbean, Caribeña, Latina.

Kendalyn Mckisick



Which of these words do you feel most connected to: wilderness, the land, the outdoors, nature, the environment, or something else?

I feel equally connected to both "nature" and "the land."

What do you see as your responsibilities to it?

To contribute by nurturing and preserving it while inspiring others to do the same.

How has your race or culture shaped your relationship to it?

My grandfather was a farmer. In the early 90s. I grew up in Forest City, Arkansas helping my grandmother shuck corn, peel purple hull peas, and wash collard greens. There was a cottonfield right in our backyard. I acknowledge and realize that my upbringing, as well as the historic past of Black people in the US, has shaped me into the person I am today. While I love spending time in nature and growing my own food, I have simultaneously reckoned with the fact that people who look like me are not represented in many spaces where agriculture and the outdoors are topics of discussion. By continuing to show up in these spaces (or creating new spaces) and empowering other POC to do so, I am pushing back at this erasure. I am reclaiming land and labor through my relationship to them each day.

What words do you prefer to use when describing your race?

Mixed Race, African American and White.

Capenruilnguq Jenine Heakin of Eek, Alaska



Which of these words do you feel most connected to: wilderness, the land, the outdoors, nature, the environment, or something else?

Ella (weather), Nuna (land), Meq (water), Yuilquq (nature).

How has your race or culture shaped your relationship to it?

My earliest memory of working on king salmon with my family was when I was about six years old. I remember holding an uluaq (traditional knife) and cutting slabs to make dried fish, just the way my grandparents

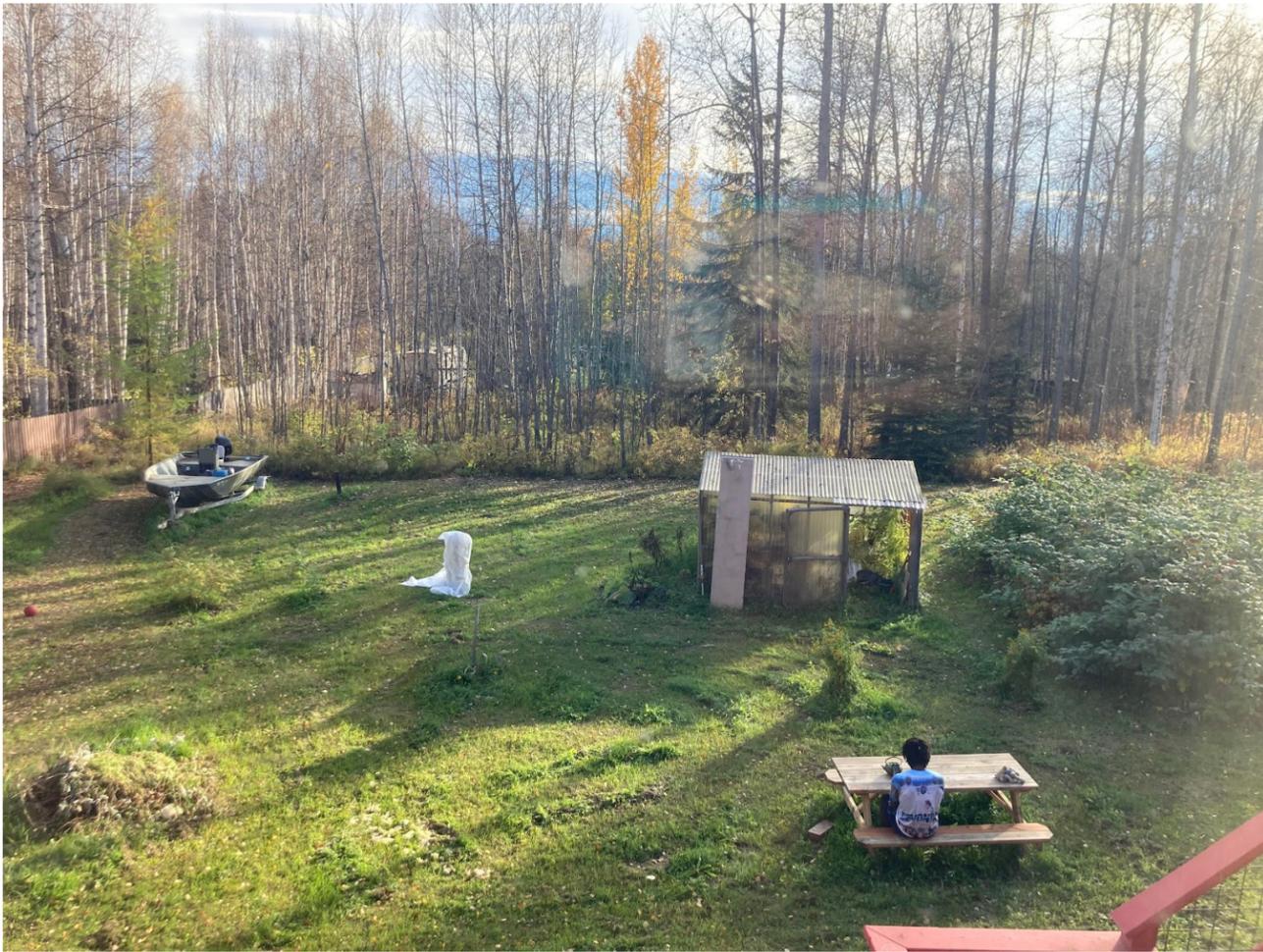
had taught me. Growing up in a small Yup'ik-based community with close family ties, subsistence hunting and gathering was always a big part of our lives. Awareness for the seasons were taught naturally by our grandparents through stories when gathering seasons approached. We did everything with care and caution as the weather was a main factor for gathering. From a young age we were taught to respect the land, water, animals, and our surroundings. Everything that was taught was spoken through our native tongue, Yugtun. From the early morning rise we were spoken to in Yugtun to have self-awareness, to be thoughtful of our surroundings; not only of the people, but our world around us.

What do you see as your responsibilities to it?

From the spring arrival of birds and gathering of wild eggs, the salmon in the rivers, and gathering of wild plants, gathering wild berries, to fall hunts of moose and caribou, my ancestors lived fruitful, healthy lives many times before us. They gathered off the land, the water, and adapted to the weather. They were healthy people. My culture has taught me and my family to appreciate all the gifts from the land and water that has fed us through many seasons. In return, we give thanks to the land that has provided through many unforeseen seasons. Our ella (weather) is changing, but we are adapting people, and we are strivers. My

culture has taught me to take care of the land as it has cared for us. To share those same values to my children and the future generations to come has been most rewarding.

JaVeon Brigham



Which of these words do you feel most connected to: wilderness, the land, the outdoors, nature, the environment, or something else?

Nature.

How has your race or culture shaped your relationship to it?

I feel most connected to nature as an African-American in my specific neighborhood in Augusta, Georgia. My connection to the land was fostered mostly during my early childhood. I remember seeing vast swaths of Georgia clay behind the apartment complex and being mesmerized by it. When I reached my early 20's I had a mentor teach me Tai Chi and I connected to the trees using Chinese grounding principles.

What do you see as your responsibilities to it?

Now that I am 26 I have had a spiritual mentor for about half a year and she has taught me about connecting to the land in a spiritual way and trusting my guides who are mostly in the form of animals. In a divine sense I respect the land I walk upon, I never litter, and I try my best to put bugs outside instead of killing them. I'm still learning about nature and I always will in my lifetime, especially in Alaska!

What words do you prefer to use when describing your race?

When describing my race I tend to say black people, my brothers and sisters. If it's my wife speaking, she would say, "Look at all my melanin!"

Rafael Bitanga



Which of these words do you feel most connected to: wilderness, the land, the outdoors, nature, the environment, or something else?

Nature.

How has your race or culture shaped your relationship to it?

I've spent my whole life living in rural areas and Alaska's nature is unique. The Alaska

nature has allowed my background as a Filipino-American to thrive. In the Philippines, I spent time in the farms with my grandparents and while this is not Alaska, I've been able to enjoy nature through hikes and camps during the summer. Additionally, while photography is not a part of my race or culture, I've grown to become fascinated with photography and I currently serve as a portrait photographer in Kodiak, Alaska. I do not have a photography studio so nature serves as the backdrop of my photo sessions. Everytime I enter the outdoors, I am immersed in the blue waters followed by a small gust of wind that wraps me to feel comforted as I watch the birds fly from one towering Sitka Spruce to another. As I begin to wind down in the evening, I remember the vastness of the ocean that the fresh salmon and cod swim in, which I am connected to because my parents work fishing cannery processors, and the blend of purple, pink, orange, and yellow sky that hide behind the grand mountains that surround my home.

What do you see as your responsibilities to it?

As a leader of the next-generation, I am responsible for protecting, developing, and sharing the nature that we have. Being an immigrant to the land of the Alutiiq/Sugpiaq people, I have a duty to pay respect to nature and the land and in my line of work as a photographer; it is educating my clients about the land that we enter that we use as backdrops and leaving these spaces undisturbed especially because they are inhabited by other species. Developing, maintaining, and sharing nature are other responsibilities I have. In high school, I participated in trail building to create accessible paths and allow people to access and see the beauty that Alaskan nature has to offer.

What words do you prefer to use when describing your race?

Filipino-American.

Chelsea Bringham



Which of these words do you feel most connected to: wilderness, the land, the outdoors, nature, the environment, or something else?

I feel most connected to the word nature.

How has your race or culture shaped your relationship to it?

My family is from Jamaica. So, being from the islands, my family has always enjoyed trips to the beach. We used to sing songs about animals, and I remember listening to Bob Marley's "Three Little Birds." often. As a child, I did not

understand what his songs were about. However, because one mentioned birds and we listened to him often with the windows open, letting the outside in, the thought of animals, in general, made me happy. Seeing animals in their element always excited me as a kid. As a child, we were also always playing outside or taking long walks as a family. We took walks on trails where we could find flowers that we could suck the nectar out of, and often, I used to wander off and come across ponds and large trees that I could climb. It all felt natural.

What do you see as your responsibilities to it?

I believe it is my responsibility to respect nature and either teach others to do the same or lead by example. I believe I have a responsibility to protect the untouched lands that are left and, when I find myself immersed in nature, to tread lightly and not disturb the life there.

What words do you prefer to use when describing your race?

I am Black.

Carlos De La Torre



Which of these words do you feel most connected to: wilderness, the land, the outdoors, nature, the environment, or something else?

The outdoors and the environment.

How has your race or culture shaped your relationship to it?

My culture had a special influence with the outdoors. Growing up in a small town of Mexico, we weren't exposed to a line between nature and home. We saw the land as a resource and home at the same time. During my childhood our backyard, "el corral", was my favorite place to spend time with my siblings. Climbing the tree and wandering in creeks built a fundamental connection with nature. Culturally, Hispanics enjoy the outdoors through social gatherings, some of which I've been a part of as an adult. Recent movements made by park service initiatives have provided a more welcoming feeling for everyone to enjoy a wider variety of activities in the outdoors.

Those special initiatives helped diversify my connections with nature. I now enjoy long treks, hikes, skiing, biking, photography/film, among others. It may seem as though I went in a circle from my childhood, or maybe it's where I belonged all along.

What do you see as your responsibilities to it?

After choosing a career in conservation, I have the duty and pleasure to facilitate stewardship via multiple opportunities. Through my past jobs as a volunteer coordinator, park ranger, and park naturalist, I've created opportunities for visitors to connect with their public lands and establish an enhanced meaning between them and the natural and cultural resources. Helping volunteers and interns has been my most impactful experience. In-service learning provides a stronger connection to a park than short visits, it provides ownership and a sense of belonging. These experiences create personal memories for the public that are cherished individually or with others. Knowing that I helped make that happen takes me to a point of fulfillment.

What words do you prefer to use when describing your race?

Mexican, hispanic, latino.